

Acropolis Cinema and the UCLA Film
& Television Archive present



Hirokazu Kore-eda:
Cinema from the Outside In

October 26-29, 2017 ~ Downtown Independent & Billy
Wilder Theater

ABOUT THE SERIES

Since his debut fiction feature *Maborosi* in 1995, Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda has quietly built an international reputation as the contemporary heir apparent to the legacy of Yasujiro Ozu through a series of restrained but powerfully moving portraits of Japanese family life. It's a comparison that Kore-eda himself has rejected and one that has its limitations. Kore-eda displays a masterful attention to stillness and the gentle rhythms of the everyday, but he is equally attuned to the disruptions and dislocations that ripple and break the surface of things. From *Maborosi* to *After the Storm* (2016), Kore-eda's characters struggle with loss, separation, guilt and healing is always tenuous. Kore-eda has also worked compellingly in a variety of genres including documentary (*However...*), true-life stories (*Distance*), *chanbara* (*Hana*), fantasy (*Air Doll*) and thrillers, including his most recent film *The Third Murder* (2017). The Archive is honored to host Kore-eda for a special program of screenings and conversations at the Billy Wilder Theater as part of a series of events around the city in celebration of his remarkable career.

A Death in the Family by Dennis Lim

The following article was originally published by the Criterion Collection

Death looms over the films of Hirokazu Kore-eda. His first fiction feature, *Maborosi* (1995), is a quiet study of bereavement, about a young woman struggling to move on after her husband's inexplicable suicide. In *After Life* (1998), a supernatural fable about the materiality of memory (and of film), the newly deceased find themselves in an ethereal limbo where they pick a single worldly recollection to be turned into an eternal celluloid keepsake. *Distance* (2001) observes the conflicting emotions—the sorrow, shame, and incomprehension—of the relatives of cult members who participated in a fatal terrorist attack and a ritualistic mass suicide.

The Japanese director's sixth fiction feature, *Still Walking* (2008), is his most direct expression yet of the axiom that death is a part of life—or, more precisely, that life is often lived in the shadow of death. While this is an obvious enough fact, something we know firsthand or at least grasp instinctively, it poses specific cinematic challenges: to make a film about grief and loss is, in effect, to confront something that's not there, to map the contours of a void. But Kore-eda, a director of finesse, patience, and emotional intelligence, is naturally drawn to structuring absences—from the departed loved ones in *Maborosi* and *Distance* to the offscreen specter of the missing parents in *Nobody Knows* (2004), about four young siblings left to fend for themselves. *Still Walking* is a movie with a gaping absence at its center. Except for a brief coda, it unfolds over the course of a daylong family gathering, held annually to mark the anniversary of the death of the Yokoyamas' eldest son (it has been fifteen years)—a commemorative rite observed by a clan that is in no danger of forgetting. The altar in memory of Junpei dominates a room in the parental home. He is buried in a nearby cemetery from which there is a picturesque view of the sea, where he lost his life. For the occasion, the elderly parents are joined not just by their two grown children and their families but also, briefly and excruciatingly, by the boy—now a man—Junpei saved from drowning.

For the parents—especially the father, Kyohei (Yoshio Harada), a retired doctor who had dearly hoped to bequeath his medical practice to his boys—the dead son remains an idealized symbol of unwasted potential. Next to the infallible ghost of his brother, the surviving son, Ryota (Hiroshi Abe), cannot possibly measure up. A tall, stooped man with a perpetually wary air, Ryota is an underemployed art restorer, newly married to a widowed single mother. He suffers the open disapproval of his father (who, by way of greeting, mutters, "Oh, you're here") and in response has cultivated a

shell of defensive prickliness. Ryota's mother, Toshiko (Kirin Kiki), is a warmer presence than hegruff husband, but the maternal fussing barely masks deep embitterment and neurosis. (She's the one who extends the yearly invitation to the young man whom she holds responsible for claiming her son's life; she admits that she needs someone to blame.)

The family-reunion melodrama has long been an international cinematic staple: in countless movies, a fractious clan gathers for Christmas or Thanksgiving or a wedding or a funeral, only to have bombshells drop, grudges explode, and accusations fly, paving the way for a climax of collective catharsis and teary reconciliation. *Still Walking* is not nearly as eventful. It exposes, without spelling out, the tangled dynamics that bind the Yokoyamas. Amid crosscurrents of small talk and moments of quotidian pleasure—as the kids play, as childhood photos and memorabilia are dug up, as food is communally prepared and consumed—histories and agendas emerge. The daughter, Chinami (the pop star turned actress named You, who played the mother in *Nobody Knows*), is looking to move into the parents' house with her husband and two kids, a plan that would require taking over Junpei's old room. The habitual nonstop bickering between the parents turns out to stem from Toshiko's long-nursed resentment over Kyohei's infidelity (which also partly accounts for her startling, offhand capacity for passive aggression).

Kore-eda dramatizes the flow of the day with a spontaneity so gentle that it can be easy to miss the artful arrangement that has gone into this domestic portrait. In most of the scenes, he isolates two or three people from the larger family context: parent and child, brother and sister, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, grandfather and stepgrandson. These configurations—clusters within and across generations—each fill in part of the picture, revealing something about those engaged in conversation as well as about their connections to those who are the topic of conversation. (As often happens at big family gatherings, a lot is revealed about people in their absence.) Meaning arises from the discrepancies between what people say in different situations. At times, a seemingly innocuous remark is later revealed to have been, for someone else, a wounding slight (the kids' referring to "Grandma's house" in Grandpa's presence, a misremembered anecdote that substitutes one son for another). Kore-eda also grants a few telling moments of solitude to his characters, away from the bustle of the reunion: Ryota in his parents' bathroom, taking stock of the tangible signs of decay and aging (broken tiles, a newly installed handrail); Ryota's young stepson, Atsushi (Shohei Tanaka), mourning his own loss, talking to his dead father in the yard.

Both the novelistic touches and the documentary details in -Kore-eda's work reflect his formative years—he studied literature at Tokyo's Waseda University and began his career making nonfiction films for Japanese television. The themes of loss and memory, not to mention his signature empathy for traumatized figures, are present in most of his early documentaries. *However . . .* (1991) links the life stories of two suicides: a bureaucrat in charge of Japan's social welfare system and a woman who was a casualty of its failures.

August Without Him (1994) centers on the first Japanese man to publicly admit contracting HIV through gay sexual contact; *Without Memory* (1996), likewise structured around direct encounters with the subject, is about a man who, due to a botched surgical procedure, suffers from a rare form of amnesia that prevents his brain from creating new memories.

Many of Kore-eda's documentaries have informed his fiction films. He adapted *Maborosi* from a novel but, in shaping his heroine, also drew from the government official's widow in *However . . .* . . . The fascination with mnemonic process in *After Life* stems from the stranger-than-fiction case of *Without Memory*. Beyond his own nonfiction work, Kore-eda has also borrowed from real-life events. The cult in *Distance* is modeled on the notorious Aum Shinrikyo group, which launched sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995. *Nobody Knows*—which has affinities with Kore-eda's first documentary, *Lessons from a Calf* (1991), about elementary school kids learning to care for a calf (and in the process to cope with loss)—is loosely based on a child-abandonment news story that scandalized Japan in the eighties.

Still Walking, Kore-eda's most personal work, has strong elements of autobiography. He has said that he made it in response to the death of his mother, whom he nursed toward the end of her life, and the film is full of personalizing details, the sense memories of childhood. It lingers in the kitchen as daikons are peeled, carrots chopped, edamame washed and salted. The humble corn tempura fritter is the equivalent here of Proust's madeleine, and Kore-eda captures the vivid details of its preparation, from the snapping of the kernels off the cob to the crackle of the batter as it hits the hot oil. The film's title comes from the lyrics of a 1960s hit, "Blue Light Yokohama," a favorite of Kore-eda's mother, and of Toshiko in the movie, for whom this wistfully romantic song has a perverse significance (we learn that it is a reminder of her husband's betrayal).

Kore-eda has always seemed to stand apart from most of his generational cohort—many of his best-known contemporaries, like Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Takashi Miike, are given to genre-minded experimentation, and in their own ways extend the radicalizing projects of such Japanese New Wave figures as Nagisa Oshima and Shohei Imamura. Often tagged as an old-school humanist, Kore-eda appears more directly descended from the age of classical cinema, and in tackling the "home drama," that most quintessentially Japanese of genres, he invites comparisons to the most revered of his nation's filmmakers, Yasujiro Ozu.

At first glance, *Still Walking* does not lack for Ozu-esque themes and tropes. It concerns the relationship between parents and children. Much of it is confined to shoji-screen and tatami-mat interiors. The camera is usually fixed, and there's even some pillow-shot punctuation; when we are outdoors, an occasional train stretches across the screen. It would not be inaccurate to call *Still Walking* a film that "grew under the shade" of Ozu, as Claire Denis has described *35 Shots of Rum*, her 2008 tribute to the Japanese master's *Late Spring*. But it is important to point out that *Still Walking* lacks the insistent discretion and circumscribed austerity of an Ozu film. Like another Ozu update, *Café Lumière*, by Hou Hsiao-hsien (the subject of one of Kore-eda's documentaries), *Still Walking* takes care to reflect the sociocultural realities of present-day Japan ("These days, we're not so abnormal," Ryota tells his mother when she makes a jab about his unconventional family). And if Ozu's ordinary folk are paragons of calm acceptance, Kore-eda's are less reconciled to life's cruelties and disappointments; if anything, as Kore-eda has pointed out, they are closer to the stubborn, openly anguished characters of Mikio Naruse, a director with a bleaker worldview than Ozu.

There are no sentimental breakthroughs in Kore-eda's day in the life—and the flash-forward epilogue implies that they don't exist in life, period. In this family, people and relationships don't change in any fundamental sense; avoidance prevails over confrontation. Some might simply chalk this up to Japanese decorum, but it has at least as much to do with Kore-eda's gimlet-eyed appraisal of how hurts and grievances play out in most families, whatever the culture: silently and subcutaneously, in coded words and actions. But while Kore-eda grants his characters no epiphanies, he allows them pangs of regret and moments of dawning awareness. Resentments go unaired, and problems remain unsolved, but they are, however dimly or privately, recognized, even understood—which is, at least, one definition of family love. ♦

Upcoming Acropolis screenings:

Nov. 7: *Casa de Lava* (Pedro Costa, 1994)—Downtown Independent

Nov. 15: *Bolivar, a Tropikal Symphony* (Diego Risquez, 1979)—Downtown Independent

Nov. 21 & 24: *On the Beach At Night Alone* (Hong Sangsoo)—Downtown Independent



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AcropolisCinema@gmail.com

www.acropoliscinema.com